

Costas Economou (b. 1925)¹

Costas Economou's artistic oeuvre is characterised by large output and by pluralism in the employment of materials, media and techniques. At the same time, he has creatively assimilated a series of influences and idioms from the history of modern Western art, and he has, at times, been inclined to experiment. Any experimentation, however, has never been for its own sake, thus he has not engaged in superficially impressive yet essentially empty creation; he has abandoned or avoided the adoption of any expressions or methods that proved alien to his idiosyncrasy.

Three decades ago, Greek art historian Chrysanthos Christou wrote that, "one of the most positive elements of modern and contemporary Cypriot art is the absence of a close dependence on some major [artistic] centre [...], a fact of defining importance for its development. Having simultaneous ties with English and Greek art, but at the same time, open to all other explorations, Cypriot art is advancing quickly and freely in negotiating new trends, coming from every direction".² I consider Costas Economou's work to be one of the most typical and concise examples – on an individual level – of the above description of Cypriot art. In his painting, allusions to 19th-century landscape tradition, to Impressionism, as well as to post-impressionist tendencies – such as Paul Cézanne's landscapes – creatively integrate with elements from early 20th-century modernisms – such as, Fauvism and Expressionism. While this is the main framework within which his art can be situated, Economou hasn't been unwilling to experiment with a wider range of expressions and materials (such as cement relief sculpture), or to elaborate on traditional media in "unorthodox" ways, such as the integration of monotype into his watercolours. The latter undoubtedly constitute the most fascinating aspect of his oeuvre, partly because of his long and systematic preoccupation with aquarelle, and mainly because of applying it in such a manner, so that the "nature" and qualities of the medium are manifested at their best.

Generally, Economou has been engaged in long and systematic explorations in all aspects of his artistic output, in parallel to an equally long involvement in both

¹ My thanks to Costas Economou, for an enjoyable collaboration, for providing me with all the photographic material included here, and for the pleasant and enlightening conversations we had, amidst works of art, at his house in Kissonergha.

All translations from Greek are mine.

² Chrysanthos Christou, *Concise History of Modern and Contemporary Cypriot Art* [in Greek; written in 1977] (Nicosia: Education Service of the Ministry of Education, 1983), p. 11.

Cyprus' cultural scene and the field of education, as well as in wider issues affecting the overall community.

He was born in 1925, in the village of Kissonergha in the Paphos district. According to Economou himself, “even though we were living in a rural environment, the conditions in our home were highly favourable to intellectual and artistic discussions”.³ Moreover, his family espoused liberal and progressive views – his father, Nicolas Economou, “was among the pioneers of the co-operative movement, and he was fighting for the rights of the farmers [...]”.⁴ Economou's interest in art began back in primary school; after high school, he attended the Teacher's College in Morphou (in 1943-45), where the painter Adamantios Diamantis was among his teachers. Economou associated closely with Diamantis, who helped the younger man develop his abilities in painting: “I think that only then did I realise what painting meant to me, without of course even considering yet that I could become a painter. The satisfaction of painting was more than enough”.⁵

After his graduation from college in 1945, he was appointed as a primary school teacher, initially in various rural schools. At the same time, he continued painting, mostly views of the countryside areas where he was employed [figs. 1, 2]. In 1951 he was transferred to Nicosia. According to Economou, in the schools at the time, “new ideas were being implemented, concerning the use of art for the aesthetic cultivation and the growth of the personality of the children, by encouraging creativity and free expression [...], starting with the oldest ones. Pencils or, at best, crayons, which used to be the sole media given [to children], were replaced by watercolours (temperas), pastels, ink, linoleum for engraving, clay for pottery, stone for sculpture, and a series of materials and tools for crafts”.⁶ It was his direct involvement in the introduction of these new methods that brought about his transfer to the island's capital, specifically, to Aghios Antonios Primary School, which at the time was considered a model school. While there, Economou met two colleagues with similar interests in art – Andreas Papadopoulos and the future sculptor, Andreas Savvides; together they took Sunday

³ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Thomas Symeou (“Costas Economou's course in Art” [In Greek]), in the journal *Nea Epochi*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1996), p. 32.

⁴ Ibid. Elsewhere, Economou mentions: “My father was a man who read a lot. He bought books and, for his time, he was among the most educated and enlightened [Cypriots]”. From an interview to Maro Charalambous (“The sober and passionate lover of the Cypriot landscape” [in Greek]), *Haravghi* newspaper, 4/12/88. Photocopy no. 39, Costas Economou's file, Archive of the State Gallery of Contemporary Cypriot Art, Nicosia.

⁵ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Thomas Symeou, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

trips to the countryside for plein air painting [fig. 3]. According to Economou, Theodotos Kanthos, inspector for art education, “who was the main promoter” of the new approaches in the teaching of art in schools, offered them another opportunity for personal artistic development. Kanthos organised a portrait workshop in his house, to which he invited interested school teachers for life-drawing (in charcoal or pencil).⁷ In 1952-53, Economou worked as art teacher at the English School in Nicosia, replacing the painter Ioannis Kissonerghis, who had immigrated to South Africa.

Some works by Economou from the early 1950s, already have characteristics that will remain constantly present throughout his subsequent oeuvre. Thematically and stylistically, landscapes and rural scenes dominate, imbued with Genre-like realism, painted in oil, usually on board, and with watercolours. In the oil pictures, Economou seems rather insecure in the handling of the medium, especially with regard to the rendering to the human figure, to such degree that his pictures resemble naïf painting [figs. 4, 5]. On the contrary, from early on, his aquarelles demonstrate great skill, which will establish him as one of best watercolourists in Cypriot art [figs. 6, 7]. These early works indicate that, while chronologically Economou belongs to the second generation of Cypriot art, stylistically he is closer to the first one, the generation of Diamantis and Telemachos Kanthos.

In 1954 Economou first met Christoforos Savva, subsequently, the most important artist of the second generation, and the greatest Cypriot modernist. Savva had returned to Cyprus following the first period his studies in London, and left again in 1956, the year Economou also went to the UK, where he studied at King Alfred’s College at Winchester (during 1956-57) [fig. 8]. He attended education and art classes – including, painting, ceramics and engraving. He also had the chance to visit museums and galleries, both in London and in Paris, where he twice met up with Savva.

The latter returned permanently to Cyprus in 1959. During this time, more young artists came back to the island after their studies abroad (England, mostly), such as, Stelios Votsis, Andreas Chrysochos, Nikos Dymiotis and Economou’s former colleague, Andreas Savvides. During the 1960s, all of them would become part of the group which tried to modernise Cyprus’ art scene, by adopting more contemporary trends of international art, than those which the artists of Diamantis’ generation had followed. Already back in late 1955-early 1956, some of these younger ones (Economou, among

⁷ Ibid.

them), along with other people from the wider cultural scene, established the Pancyprrian Union of Art Votaries, which put up various events, including exhibitions.⁸ In 1958 the “Union” was replaced by the Pancyprrian Society of Art Votaries, which continued organising art shows, up to 1960.

Savva had been the president of the “Union”, and he also joined the “Society”, upon his return to Cyprus. From 1960 on, he would find himself in the centre of the effort for artistic and overall cultural renewal in Cyprus, with the establishment by him (and Welsh artist Glyn Hughes, permanent resident on the island) of *Apophasis*. Besides being an exhibition space, *Apophasis* was an important cultural centre, where various activities took place, such as discussions, theatre performances, film screenings, etc. Economou carried on with his friendship with Savva during these years (and up to the latter’s death, in 1968), even though he himself did not follow Savva’s artistic pursuits, nor did he adopt the various contemporary trends that other artists had taken on, such as Minimalism, abstraction, Op Art, etc. Nevertheless, not only did he participate in their various activities, but also he didn’t hesitate, mostly under Savva’s influence, to experiment in more modernist idioms than those in which the main body of his work was developing. Among the earliest such examples are *Self Portrait* [fig. 9] and, especially, *Worker* [fig. 10], which alludes directly to the compositional and colouristic traits of Fauvism: emphasis on the flatness of the painterly surface, and treatment of the (recognisable) subject matter as an arrangement of brightly coloured areas. It is interesting that these two works manifest a skilfulness in the handling of oil that is generally lacking from his more “conservative” paintings in this medium.

Such formalist explorations are, however, the smaller part of Economou’s oeuvre. “I tried of course, on many occasions, to express myself in the aesthetically unique manner of Savva’s, mostly by emphasising a reductive, flat rendition of the subject. However, this effort did not last long. It is, you see, a matter of artistic idiosyncrasy, and in this respect, I am closer to realistic than minimalist tendencies, though I respect the latter, even when they arrive at full abstraction”.⁹

⁸ Economou mentions that the older artists were initially sceptical toward the Union of Art Votaries. Diamantis, in particular, told Economou that he regarded the Union’s members as “British Council people” – apparently, because some of them had either held or participated in exhibitions there. He even asked them, both orally and in a letter, to change the Union’s name, because he thought it was too similar to that of the “Society of Art Votaries” of the Pancyprrian Gymnasium’s graduates, which had been established in 1943. Soon, however, Diamantis and the other artists of his generation saw the Union of Art Votaries in a more positive light. *Ibid.*, p. 34. See also, letter by A. Diamantis to C. Economou, dated 5/02/56 (archive of Costas Economou).

⁹ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Thomas Symeou, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

In parallel to the bolder pursuits of this period, Economou continued creating excellent aquarelles [fig. 11], engravings [fig. 12] – another aspect of his oeuvre which has produced high quality works – and small sculptures [fig. 13]. From the beginning of the 1960s, come the first samples of aquarelles made with the “wet paper process” [fig. 14], a technique which Economou will apply more frequently from the end of the decade onwards. “There are basically two approaches, two methods with regard to watercolour. One is to work on dry paper, and the other, on wet one. The first method can give clear shapes and well-defined outlines to the [colour] areas, while with the second, colours mix with each other, dilute into one another, enabling you to give more tonal combinations”.¹⁰

In 1962, Economou held his first solo exhibition in Paphos (at the Town Hall), where he had continued teaching, after his return from England. This show amounted to a kind of retrospective, since it included works (sixty one watercolours and oils, and three sculptures) from 1949 onward. The stylised, “minimalist” drawing that illustrates the exhibition’s brochure [fig 15], indicates modernist integrations into the main body of his oeuvre, again, possibly under Savva’s influence. It was at the latter’s *Apophysis* that Economou held his second solo show in 1963, while it would be seventeen more years until he held his third one, in 1980. In the meanwhile, however, he went on participating in group shows, both in Cyprus and abroad, while his art continued to include a variety of materials and media, as well as traditional works next to modernising ones [figs. 16, 17]. The latter continued deriving elements from early 20th-century European art, such as Expressionism, Fauvism, and from a mild, late Cubist idiom (introduced in Cyprus by Savva, in the late 1950s), rather than from the aforementioned, more recent trends in contemporary art, which had been adopted by Savva and some other Cypriot artists. Additionally, Economou kept on producing more excellent aquarelles [figs. 18, 19].

At the same time, he continued participating in local cultural activities, such as the founding of the Cyprus Chamber of Fine Arts [E.KA.TE], in 1964. Even more extensive was his involvement in educational affairs, both as teacher and, from 1970 onward, as school inspector for art, a position he held up to his retirement in 1985. In 1980, Economou was among those who established the Cypriot Society for Education

¹⁰ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Meropi Tsimilli-Michael (“Cypriot landscape’s atmosphere via aquarelle’s transparency” [In Greek]), *Empros* newspaper, 16/03/90. Photocopy no. 59, C. Economou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.

through Art [K.O.E.T.], the local chapter of the International Society for Education through Art [IN.S.E.A.], in which he was an individual member since the 1970s.

Another area of his creation concerns the writing of art historical texts. The most important ones are, a treatise on the memoirs of the 19th-century Greek Revolution fighter Ioannis Makriyannis, and its illustrations by Panayiotis Zographos (published in the journal *Kypriaka Chronika* in 1972); an analysis of the work of Savva, in *Christoforos Savva* (Nicosia: the Ministry of Education, 1982); and an article on Adamantios Diamantis, published in the journal *Nees Epoches* (no. 187) in 1989. All three texts demonstrate a thorough and detailed analysis of their respective subjects.

Back in 1971-72, Economou enrolled in the Department of Art of the Institute of Education at the University of London, where he attended theoretical courses, next to engraving and photography classes. At the same time, he attended night classes in painting at St. Martin's School of Art. His work in these years, however, does not manifest any important departures from his earlier oeuvre – with aquarelles remaining his most successful creations [figs. 20, 21]. “I have been always moved by the changes in the atmosphere and in the colours [around me], and I have always tried to express this emotion. This is why I prefer watercolour; it is the medium most suited to render this atmosphere, this succession [of moods], this change, the sensitivity and the transparency, which cannot be rendered with any other material that, as a medium, is not as transparent”.¹¹

In the 1970s, relief sculptures constituted a new aspect in his oeuvre, made mostly of cement (mixed with sand or, later on, with perlomin and various other binding materials) [figs. 22, 23]; examples of these were included in his third solo exhibition, in 1980 (Zygos Gallery, Nicosia). According to Economou, he learnt this medium and technique from Savva, “who created reliefs with coloured cement (called ‘plastic-painting’ by Chrysanthos Christou) [...]”.¹² “These relief sculptures are made while placed on the ground, like big plates; they are poured in casts; they are made of cement mixed with colour, so that the latter is part of the main material, and not just paint on the surface. Finally, they are fixed on the wall”.¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Comments by Economou, from an interview with Thomas Symeou, op. cit., p. 42. He adds that, his “other close friend, Andreas Savvides”, was his teacher in the “second direction” toward which his sculptural work developed, namely, “the more familiar one: clay model, plaster mould and casting of the final work in bronze, fibre-glass, cement fondu, etc.”.

¹³ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Maro Charalambous, op. cit.

Among the engravings that Economou showed at the above exhibition, there were two linocuts from 1978, which referred to the political and military events of 1974 in Cyprus: *Fall* and *Effort* [figs. 24, 25]. The rendering of the tragic character of those events and of death, in the first image, is followed by the depiction of hope for a better future, in the second one. The subject matter of the two pictures could have easily led to rather pedantic, melodramatic works, had the artist opted for realist-oriented depictions. On the contrary, the rather rough, stylised rendering of the figures and the landscape – a mixture of allusions to early 20th-century German Expressionism, as well as to Pablo Picasso’s art from the interwar period – instils the images with great expressive force.

In general, Economou’s sculptures and engravings, in contrast to most of his paintings, are imbued with social, political and existential concerns. “My overall work is not restricted to landscape painting. The human figure moves me and I paint it. In my engravings and relief sculptures, my subjects derive mostly from human, social problems”.¹⁴ The comments by journalist Lyn Haviland, in reference to Economou’s fifth solo exhibition in 1985 (Gloria Gallery, Nicosia), are in the same vein: “[H]e is not only a romantic painter catching the sunsets, the spreading green of nature and the potted geraniums – details which enchant – he [also] catches the poignancy of life, the bitter cruelty of so much that happens to innocent people. [...] His black and white prints represent death, violence, love and hate – all in one”.¹⁵

The aforementioned influences from early European modernism and especially Picasso, sporadically continued manifesting themselves in Economou’s works from the 1980s and later on, made in various materials and with various techniques [figs. 26, 27, 28, 29]. Alongside these, he created more “realistic” works, the best of which exhibit a tendency for reduction, which keeps them at a distance from “ethographic” (Genre-like) pictures. As with the above works, Economou employs once again a variety of means and media: landscapes in oil [fig. 30], female nudes in various materials [fig. 31], and of course, his ever-excellent watercolours [fig. 32], which constituted the sole exhibits in his next three solo shows, in 1988 (Ora Gallery, Nicosia), 1989 (Roghmi Gallery, Limassol) and 1990 (Gloria Gallery, Nicosia). At the same time, he continued experimenting, both formalistically and technically: some of his engravings from the 1990s, for instance, are on the verge of abstraction [fig. 33]. Moreover, his mastery of

¹⁴ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Maria Chrysanthou [in Greek], *Empros* newspaper, 11/12/88. Photocopy no. 43, C. Economou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.

¹⁵ L.H., “Costas captures poignancy”, *Cyprus Mail* newspaper, 19/03/85. Photocopy no. 28, C. Economou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.

watercolour has allowed him to integrate it with other materials and methods, such as in the intriguing, fauve-like *Self Portrait* (1996), where gouache has been added [fig. 34], and in pictures where aquarelle is combined with pastels – such as, *Portrait of a Boy with Dove*, originally from 1966 and reworked in 1999 [fig. 35].

It is, however, with the monotype method that Economou systematically reworked several of his old aquarelles, from the mid-1990s onwards. He has also applied this combination of media to recent works, in which he offers an interesting mixture of the various characteristics and qualities of materials and techniques [figs. 36, 37]. Many of these pictures were exhibited in his seventeenth solo exhibition, in 2004 (Kypriaki Gonia Gallery, Larnaca). “A little time ago, while trying to put some order in my studio, I came across works that had been forgotten in drawers and envelopes. [...] Looking at them after so long, I saw a fresh charm and excitement. [...]. At the same time, I thought it appropriate to engage again with some of these, mostly aquarelles, through methods and techniques I have been lately applying to some of my new works. I am specifically referring to the completion or enrichment of an aquarelle with monotype. This procedure, as far as new pictures are concerned, merely amounts to working in mixed media. For the old ones, however, it all adds a sense of retrospection – a meeting of the past and the present on the same work”.¹⁶

Generally, this exhibition, which was a kind of retrospective (even though most of the works had never been exhibited before), amounted to a good opportunity for one to ascertain the breadth of media and methods which Economou has utilised over a period of six decades: aquarelle, oil, acrylic, pastel, pencils and ink in painting; monotype, bronze, zinc and linoleum in engraving; (mostly relief) sculpture and ceramics.

During the last two decades, he has been frequently preoccupied with coloured reliefs, now using, in addition, the colouring-over method – instead of the colour being mixed in the main material beforehand, it is applied on the surface of the “colourless”, finished work [fig. 38]. Many of these sculptures have been placed in private houses, as well as in public buildings – the above work was used as a model for the much larger *Apollo and Marsyas*, which was placed in Aghios Theodoros Gymnasium in Paphos, in 2005 [fig. 39].

¹⁶ Comments by Economou, in the press release for “Costas Economou – Painting Exhibition” [in Greek], Kypriaki Gonia Gallery, 5-30/11/04.

It seems perfectly appropriate that artworks by Economou should exist in school buildings; he is a man that, besides his many other activities, has been among the pioneers of art education reforms in Cyprus. “I see the teaching of art in school more as a medium of conduct, a weapon in the hands of the teacher helping the development of a child’s personality and character. In other words, art helps the child to get to know its environment, to obtain respect and appreciation for the individual. The younger child discovers art as a way to grow because it can express feelings, ideas and problems which cannot be expressed in words”.¹⁷ At the same time, it is particularly moving that the above work-intervention in a public space has been created while Economou has embarked on the ninth decade of his life. A multi-faceted life, one that has been characterised by an essential, moral stance; a stance that demands of the artist not to be isolated in his “world of creation”, but to be an active member of the social group, and to be concerned with, and act for, the wider good.¹⁸

The artist is a political being, always sensitive to the events that burn the hearts of, or give happiness to, the people. How could be possible for the artist not to care about others, shut in his glass tower, cutting himself off the life that so generously they present to him. [...] One theory prefers Art to be autonomous, liable only to itself [...]. The other one regards Art as being in touch with man, with his dreams and problems, in a way that it will contribute to the creation of a more beautiful and more humane society. In the field of painting and of visual arts in general, we opt for the second view.¹⁹

¹⁷ Comments by Economou, from an interview with Anastasia Solomonides (“Costas Economou: Artist of Warm Mellow Colour”), in the tourist guide *Nicosia this month*, December 1991. Photocopy no. 93, C. Economou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.

¹⁸ Among his various activities, Economou was for ten years the president of the Environment Protection Association of Paphos. “I want to offer the viewer the joy of [looking at] the landscape, and to enable him to realise the beauty and the value of our [natural] environment. Then, he will naturally respect it more. If he can enjoy it, then he will love it and protect it”. Comments by Economou, from a conversation with the engraver Hambis Tsangharis (“Freedom and quality” [in Greek]), *Haravghi* newspaper, 25/03/85. Photocopy no. 32, C. Economou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.

¹⁹ Comments by Economou (in which he paraphrases and incorporates views of Picasso), from his speech at the “Art as an Act of Resistance” symposium, organised by the Culture Office of the political party AKEL, in Nicosia, March 1995. From the article, “Art, a hymn to peace” [in Greek], *Haravghi* newspaper, 19/03/95. Photocopy no. 96, C. Economou’s file, Archive of the State Gallery.